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ABSTRACT

This newsletter describes one college of education's experiences in selecting field placement sites for preservice teachers, examining the possibilities and limitations students faced when sent to suburban versus urban schools. Site selection criteria included school characteristics (size and grade levels, neighborhood, library and computer facilities, and community involvement); principal characteristics (leadership style and ability, discipline and facility management, and community relations); teacher characteristics (degrees held, inservice training, and role in decision making); and student characteristics (class size, composition by race and socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and role in learning). Though student teachers assigned to suburban and urban schools were very similar at the beginning of the semester, by the end they were qualitatively different in their views of literacy teaching and learning. Urban school limitations included negative teacher attitudes, whole group lecture instruction, and limited student involvement. Teachers were isolated from other professionals and had decisions made for them. Teachers' attitudes affected student learning. Suburban school characteristics included use of authentic assessment, comfort with peer coaching strategies and feedback, and belief that children were active learners. Preservice teachers at suburban schools saw teachers as colleagues and decision makers and learned that the teacher's role is to model and facilitate learning. (SM)

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Limitations and Possibilities:

Effects of a "Dose of Reality" on Preservice Teachers' Perspectives

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The creation of an optimal learning atmosphere can produce astounding things. As the teacher stays immersed in seizing each available opportunity to encourage learning, the students respond by coming into synch with the nature of the teacher. It is like singing a duet, when everyone finally finds the right key—well-toned, orchestrated." —Kathy, a junior majoring in elementary education

"I intend to turn the lessons I am teaching, no matter how boring and workbook-like the activities seem to be (due to the supervising teacher's present format and her desire to keep our lessons within it) into exciting, enthusiastic, and fulfilling learning experiences for all (or as many as possible) of the students." —Joshua, a junior majoring in elementary education

Reading these students' views, one must wonder what makes them so different. Why was Kathy so positive and optimistic? If you thought that Joshua was facing quite a challenge within his cooperating teacher's classroom, you are right. Both Kathy and Joshua were completing site-based literacy courses during the same academic year. Kathy and her peers assigned to a suburban school finished their semester feeling successful, enlightened, and competent. Joshua, and the rest of the 20 undergraduates in the urban setting, completed their field placements feeling angry, defeated, and disillusioned.

It was not supposed to be this way at all. As Kathy and Joshua's professors, we had chosen exemplary schools, using the same criteria. (See Figure 1.) We developed the list over time, based upon past successes and failures with field schools and felt secure in using such a systematic approach. How could this happen when Joshua's school not only met our standard, but also was considered one of the best magnet schools in the city?

As professors in the literacy program block, we selected the field site placements for our students. This entailed visiting a number of prospective school sites, interviewing principals and teachers, observing in classrooms, and outlining the undergraduates' field placement requirements. Most of the time, we secured the field schools a year in advance. If we were dissatisfied with a field site, we were under no obligation to continue using it the following semester. Therefore, we were afforded a great deal of freedom in determining which schools to use or to avoid. The college where we were both teaching required our students to

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complete two field placements during their junior year—one semester in a suburban school and the other in an urban school. Within the two counties surrounding the college, there were many urban and suburban schools available and willing to work with our faculty and students. Thus, when we selected the two schools for our preservice teachers, we felt we had obtained ideal settings. What resulted from our field site decisions, however, was a range of teaching possibilities for one cohort of students and a set of limitations for the other.

Site Selection Criteria

The School's Characteristics. In our college's program, professors not only taught their methods courses on-site at the elementary schools, but also assigned students to classrooms to complete practicum requirements such as teaching small-group lessons. In order to supervise our students and observe their teaching, we first considered the size of the school. Were there enough classrooms for all 20 of our students to be placed? While some schools would accommodate more than one undergraduate student per classroom, many would not. The range of grade levels within a school was also a factor. To satisfy course requirements, our students completed observations in primary and intermediate grades, focusing on shared reading, writer's workshops, and literature discussions. In addition, the students collected data on classroom management, grouping, room arrangement, and schedules. By the end of the placement, the undergraduates were supposed to be

Site Selection Criteria and Comparison

CRITERIA	URBAN MAGNET SCHOOL	SUBURBAN SCHOOL
SCHOOL'S CHARACTERISTICS Size and Grade Levels Library and Computer Facilities Neighborhood Surrounding School Community Involvement and Interest in School	Magnet for Career Decision-Making 800 children Pre-K to Grade 8 Health care facility on site for children Macintosh computer lab with Internet access School library well-stocked with tradebooks Safe neighborhood Strong community connections	New York State School of Excellence 800 children K-Grade 5 Computer lab and computers in classrooms School library well-stocked and recently renovated Safe neighborhood High community involvement in school and recreational programs
PRINCIPAL'S CHARACTERISTICS Leadership Style and Ability Discipline and Management of Facilities Community Relations	Instructional leader of school Strong community connections and involvement Strong discipline and control of behavior Building clean and well-maintained High expectations for faculty and children	Instructional leader of school Literacy workshop trainer for district Fostered strong community support and involvement Good discipline within school Building clean and well-maintained Used site-based management High expectations for faculty and children
TEACHERS' CHARACTERISTICS Degrees Held Inservice Training Role in Decision-Making	All had Master's degrees Inservice training in literacy strategies and computers at school and teacher center Worked with full-time aides in each class No shared decision-making power	Most had or were working on Master's degrees Inservice training in literacy strategies and computers at school and teacher center Experience and training in peer coaching and observation Involved in shared decision-making
STUDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS Class Size Composition by Race and SES Academic Achievement Role in Learning	Class size limited to 22-25 children (below district average) African American, Hispanic, and White children Many receive free lunch Good achievement test performance Well-behaved Play a passive role in learning Individuals recognized for accomplishments in academics, sports, and the arts	Class size 28-30 students (above district average) Primarily White, middle class children Some children live in apartments and receive free or reduced lunch High achievement test performance Well-behaved Play an active role in learning

Figure 1

familiar with literacy instruction across the grade levels. A school that was an early childhood center housing pre-kindergarten through grade 2, for example, would not meet the course or program requirements.

We used a literature-based focus in our literacy methods courses, and students were required to use children's trade books and magazines in their lessons. This meant that a well-stocked school library with a range of titles, reading levels, and genres became an essential consideration in selecting a field school. A knowledgeable, accommodating librarian was a real plus, as well. In most schools, our undergraduate students were given access to the school library's resources and were allowed to check out materials to use in their lessons. Technology also became important as our students learned to evaluate software, use word processing software for writer's workshop, and get access to information on the Internet. We wanted to place our preservice teachers in schools where teachers not only had up-to-date computers, but also were skillful in using the technology with the children in their classrooms. It was important that our preservice teachers see computers used as a tool, not as a frill or electronic busywork.

When you compare the two schools in Figure 1, the urban magnet and the suburban school share similar characteristics. Both schools were large enough to accommodate our undergraduate sections within the building, and each offered a range of grade levels for placements and observations. Each had excellent library and computer facilities. A unique feature of the urban magnet was the on-site health care facility that enabled children to receive the immunizations and medical care they needed. In addition, the surrounding neighborhoods had low crime rates, meaning that our students were safe when walking in the area. The communities served by each school took great pride in the children, the programs, and the facilities.

Principals' Characteristics. We knew from experience that the principal sets the tone within the building. Since the principal was also the individual with whom the field placements were negotiated, we had a great deal of contact and interaction. We considered the principal's leadership style to be important. Was this person autocratic and demanding, or laissez-faire? Did this person lead by example or by decree? How knowledgeable was he or she about curriculum and educational innovation? We expected the principal to be the instructional leader of the school, not a manager—one who knew when to take charge and when to delegate. Of course, we judged the principal by the condition of the building, too. We found that good principals tended to have clean, well-maintained facilities. Just walking around the halls with the principals provided insights into their leadership and management styles. Did the principal know the children by name? How did the principal acknowledge the adults within the building? Was there evidence that the principal enjoyed good relations with the parents, neighborhood, and community the school served?

When you look at the comparisons between the two principals in Figure 1, both women share similar ratings. Each was clearly the instructional leader of her school—knowledgeable about curriculum and materials. The urban principal, Mrs. D, actively participated in the district's inservice workshops and encouraged her teachers to incorporate what they had learned. Mrs. R, the suburban principal, not only participated in most of the district and teacher center inservice sessions, but also was a literacy workshop leader herself with considerable expertise in literature-based reading and writing and authentic assessment.

Both buildings were clean, well-maintained, and attractive. Children's work was displayed throughout the buildings, sending the message that the school was here for the children. Clear rules for student behavior were outlined and children tended to be well-behaved. Both principals enjoyed good community relations and strong, positive relationships with parents.

The key differences between the two administrators lay in their relationships with the teachers. While both had high expectations for children and faculty, Mrs. D sought to achieve this through decree. Teachers were expected to assign significant amounts of homework each day and children were expected to complete it. Mrs. D. did not believe in shared decision-making, and so her teachers had almost no say in the running of the school. Furthermore, Mrs. D did not encourage her teachers to collaborate or work together, although most grade levels did have common planning time. Most of her faculty did not volunteer to have our undergraduates in their classrooms, a fact not revealed to the professor until the semester was over.

In Mrs. R's school, by contrast, site-based management was not only in place, it was working quite well. The teachers were involved in designing the daily

schedules for special area classes and lunch, interviewing and hiring new faculty and staff, deciding on curriculum and materials, and budgeting resources. Each teacher had an individual conference at the start of each school year to outline professional goals and targets. Mrs. R discussed with each teacher how to meet the goals—through inservice or graduate courses, visits to other schools, attendance at professional conferences, etc. While Mrs. R worked diligently to enable her teachers to reach their goals, and to obtain the resources or substitute teachers required, she also held her teachers accountable for their projected goals. At intervals, she met with each to take stock of their progress and to view evidence that each teacher was incorporating what she had learned in her teaching. Every teacher, regardless of experience, was expected to show evidence of professional development and improvement each year. According to their teachers' union contract, the opportunity to supervise undergraduates in field work or student teaching had to be available to all teachers with three or more years of experience, but they could not be required to participate. About 50 percent of the teachers did volunteer. It was later verified that they were, in fact, volunteering, not coerced.

Teachers's Characteristics. Since the teachers would be working most directly with our students and thus have the greatest influence, their credentials were a priority. Among the considerations were the highest degrees earned by each teacher. Our college required a Master's degree for any teacher working with preservice teachers in field placements or student teaching. Since New York State teachers usually obtained their Master's within the first five years of employment in order to obtain permanent certification, most experienced teachers met this requirement. We were also interested in the type of inservice training teachers had received, and how recently. Of particular interest was their familiarity with literature-based reading, writers' workshop, and authentic assessment workshops. One component of our literacy course focused on school and classroom decision-making—how individual teachers and faculties select literature, organize instruction and grouping, and collaborate with other professionals.

At first, the two faculties in the urban and suburban schools in Figure 1 appear to be comparable. Both groups of teachers have Master's degrees and updated inservice training in literacy strategies and computers. The urban teachers have the advantage of full-time aides in their classrooms, a factor that should have enabled them to work with and supervise the undergraduates easily. Having an aide should have helped Mrs. D's teachers use their class time effectively to work with small groups of children while the aide circulated among the others. The aide's presence also afforded the urban teachers the means to conference with the undergraduates after their observations. In practice, the teachers in Mrs. D's school found it difficult to schedule and conduct the three required observations. As a result, the preservice teachers assigned received limited feedback (usually a few general comments following the lesson).

Although their class sizes were larger than those of the urban teachers, the suburban teachers did not have teacher aides to assist with children or to cover the class while conferencing or observing the undergraduates. However, Mrs. R's teachers accommodated the preservice teachers by assigning them to small groups of children and rotating the observations from week to week. Conferences were conducted during the teacher's planning time or in the mornings before the children arrived.

Mrs. R's teachers did have an advantage in that they all had peer coaching training and experience. The suburban teachers employed peer coaching and observing regularly as a means of improving their teaching practices, particularly when incorporating new strategies for literacy and mathematics. These teachers were comfortable observing and recording data, as well as providing specific, timely, helpful feedback. Mrs. R's teachers were used to having other professionals in their classrooms observing them and, as a result, were comfortable when the preservice teachers sat in on their lessons. Thus, Mrs. R's teachers offered the undergraduates clear models for effective teaching practices and underscored the connections between the literacy strategies they had studied and the way they worked with children.

In contrast, the urban teachers had little or no exposure to peer coaching and had greater difficulty observing, recording information, and sharing the results with the preservice teachers. Furthermore, although Mrs. D. supported their participation in inservice workshops, the urban teachers were neither encouraged to try out the new strategies nor to use peer coaching to help each other become more effective. Mrs. D's teachers did not incorporate what they

had learned within the mandated curriculum. They were very uncomfortable when the preservice teachers observed their lessons. Consequently, the undergraduates to connect the strategies in their coursework to practice. When the preservice teachers had an opportunity to teach their own lessons, they felt self-conscious implementing the new strategies and pressured to deliver instruction in the "shotgun" fashion of Mrs. D's teachers.

Another clear distinction between the two groups of teachers was their involvement in shared decision-making within their respective buildings. Mrs. D's teachers had no voice in selecting curriculum materials, formulating building policies, scheduling, hiring decisions, or any major aspect of the school's operation. Because of this limitation, Mrs. D's teachers made very few decisions even within their own classrooms regarding instruction, grouping, or management. The teachers were isolated from their peers and implemented the literacy program as mandated. Mrs. D's teachers frequently delivered instruction to the whole class at once and overused worksheets. Mrs. D's teachers conveyed their powerless feelings to the preservice teachers. Needless to say, like Joshua, the preservice teachers were demoralized by the experience.

Student Characteristics. In their junior year, our students were supposed to have the opportunity to teach children from differing ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. This policy was intended to equip our students with the strategies and experiences to meet expectations of varying school districts. Near our college were schools serving very affluent communities where most children go to college, as well as schools serving populations from the lower socio-economic class. Area schools served Italians, Polish, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Arabs, and African Americans. The diversity of our surrounding districts provided rich opportunities for our preservice teachers.

When placing one or two undergraduates within an elementary classroom, space and class size can be problematic. Each preservice teacher would be assigned a group of 6-8 children to work with throughout the semester. Small groups then would need to have a space to meet apart from the rest of the class. Ideally, the classroom would contain a heterogeneous group of students to enable our preservice teachers to work with a wide range of ability levels.

In comparing Mrs. D's to Mrs. R's school in Figure 1, Mrs. R's school had the advantage of smaller class size. Mrs. R's school was more ethnically diverse than Mrs. D's. However, achievement test results for both schools were good, indicating that neither was underperforming. Children in both schools were well-behaved and respectful of others. In Mrs. D's school, the children looked forward to being praised over the intercom for their accomplishments in academics, sports, or the arts. Children's birthdays were also recognized in the morning announcements. When Mrs. D began her morning announcements, she had the full attention of every child in the building. She knew them by name, kept up with their lives within and outside of school, and made them feel important.

A key distinction between the two schools was the definition and expectation of the student's role in learning. In Mrs. D's school, children were expected to do as they were told, complete their assignments, and turn their work in on time. Student projects and hands-on learning were not part of the student experience. Student-led groups for readers and writers' workshop did not exist. Children did not discuss books; they completed worksheets on basal stories. In Mrs. D's school students had become passive learners.

In contrast, Mrs. R's students were expected to be active, not passive learners. Children were given choices of books to read, problem-solving methods, and learning environments. In Mrs. R's school, children were encouraged to show what they know, not tell what they know. Children worked in cooperative learning groups, dyads and buddy situations, and peer-led discussions. They learned to ask and investigate their own questions. They learned to predict, observe, analyze, critique, and compare. Inquiry was valued more than right answers. While the classrooms in Mrs. R's building tended to be a bit noisier than Mrs. D's, the children were excited about learning and produced results. Worksheets and workbooks had all but disappeared in Mrs. R's building. Math journals, learning logs, concept maps, and student inventions replaced them. Children and teachers were excited about learning and it showed.

Effects of a "Dose of Reality"

At the beginning, middle, and end of the semesters, our students created semantic maps of themselves as teachers and explained the features of their maps in an accompanying narrative. While the group assigned to the urban school and the one for the suburban school were very similar at the beginning of the

semester, by the end they were qualitatively different in their views of literacy teaching and learning. The contrasts between the two groups were most noticeable in their perceptions of children's influences on learning and of the teacher's role and knowledge base.

The Urban School Site's Effects. In this magnet school, preservice teachers had multiple opportunities to observe, conference, teach, and plan lessons. These experiences, along with their literacy course content, were intended to strengthen the link between theory and practice, to equip them with a variety of teaching strategies, and to prepare them to teach in an urban environment.

As shown in Figure 2, the limitations presented by the urban school are evident. The teachers consistently presented whole-class lessons, although the range of ability was quite large. The classroom aides were often used as "enforcers" who patrolled the classroom to help maintain order during the large-group, skill-based lessons. Although the teachers had inservice training in the same techniques presented in the literacy course, they seldom used them. Instead, they employed whole-group lectures, not the strategies they could have modeled. Many students, like Tracy, noted this in their narratives:

"Even though students vary a great deal in the classroom, one lesson has to be taught to all the students. . . . Student involvement is an important factor because it keeps them interested in the lesson. Often times during a lesson, the students become restless, causing the teacher to stop to discipline the students." —Tracy, Assigned to Grade 2

Consequently, there was little student involvement in the learning and almost no student movement allowed within the classrooms. Teachers not only had negative attitudes toward teaching, but also low expectations of their children. When our students implemented the strategies they had learned in the course, they found that the children were quite capable. They could also see how the teacher's attitude and expectations of her students undermined learning. This can be seen when Lisa compared the children's responses to her whole language lessons to those the classroom teacher presented:

"The whole language process has been successful in my teaching experience. I found that the children responded more to this process than [to] the traditional ways of teaching. In order to gain the respect of the students, you need to respect them first. My students clearly showed less respect for my cooperating teacher and their student teacher because of their lack of respect for the students. They both tended to continually yell and become very aggravated with the children instead of explaining the problem and remaining calm." —Lisa, Assigned to Grade 4

Many of the students felt pressured to emulate their classroom teacher, instead of implementing the literature-based strategies. That problem could have been solved if the teachers had fulfilled their commitment to plan the course and meet with the professor throughout the semester. Planning sessions for the professor and teachers were scheduled, delayed, and rescheduled several times. Because the teachers were unwilling to meet if it meant exceeding the contracted hours, few planning meetings resulted.

By the end of the semester, preservice teachers consistently viewed teaching as a solitary endeavor, rather than a collaborative effort with other professionals in their grade levels or buildings. Teachers made few, if any, real decisions or plans; the real decision-making power was in the hands of the principal and the school board. Teachers even were left out of decisions about classroom management. In summary, most of the preservice teachers came to view the teacher as a technician, not a professional.

The Urban Magnet School's Effects on Preservice Teachers

URBAN MAGNET SCHOOL LIMITATIONS	OUTCOMES FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS
Inappropriate use of classroom teacher aides	Teacher is isolated from other professionals
Negative teacher attitude	Decisions are made by others, not the teacher
Low teacher expectations for children	Literacy instruction is implementing the basal reader as mandated
Whole group, lecture-style format	View the teacher as a technician, not a professional
Skills-based instruction	Children's culture and ethnicity impact or impede learning
Limited student movement in classroom	Teacher's attitude affects children's learning
Unwillingness to meet or plan with professor beyond union contract	
Limited student involvement in learning	

Figure 2

Thus, they believed that the job required only a limited amount of professional knowledge.

The Suburban Site's Effects. From the beginning of the semester, the preservice teachers assigned to this school had multiple opportunities to match their course content to practice (see Figure 3). The teachers not only shared the professor's literacy philosophy, but also connected it to their classroom practices. Unlike their urban counterparts, the teachers shared responsibility for planning the course content, scheduled their demonstrations of strategies for undergraduates' observations, and adhered to regular schedules for preservice teachers' conferences and observations. They maintained excellent records of the lessons they observed and offered detailed feedback and suggestions to the preservice teachers. If this meant meeting beyond the hours of their teachers' contract, they did so willingly. In addition, the teachers were enthusiastic and positive about their role in the undergraduates' professional development.

"I must not only be a teacher, but a student also. It is important to be able to continue to grow and to learn. Many changes and new discoveries in education are constantly taking place. A good teacher must be able to realize when she must make changes or alterations."—Jennifer, Assigned to Grade 3

At the conclusion of their semester, many of the preservice teachers expressed the same view as Jennifer. They recognized from their cooperating teachers' models that a teacher is constantly developing and extending her professional knowledge. In turn, this cohort came to view teachers as decision-makers who select strategies and materials to meet the needs of the children in their classes. In addition, the preservice teachers appreciated the importance of self-evaluation and reflection for their teaching practices. This can be seen in an excerpt from Shaneeka's final narrative:

"The experience of writing lesson plans also helped me in a positive way with my teaching skills. I had to plan a lesson, find an appropriate book, teach the lesson, and then evaluate myself when I was finished. This process helped me immensely because it gave me practice on what works with students and what does not. The self-evaluation will help me look back at the lesson I wrote and improve upon my work."—Shaneeka, Assigned to Grade 4

Furthermore, the teachers modeled the importance of collegiality and teamwork as they planned within and across grade levels. Shaneeka and her peers were expected to collaborate and plan with the classroom teacher. Lessons centered on the children's active involvement in learning, not on lectures. Teachers learn from their peers and from the children they teach. Above all, the novices learned that "one size does not fit all" when you teach children.

Summary

While neither of us intended to create such disparities in our students' learning opportunities, that was the result. We learned to become more discerning about the field schools we used and to obtain more information about the roles teachers play in their buildings. Like newly hatched chicks, preservice teachers experience imprinting from their field experiences and teachers. This meant that we had to work even harder to obtain quality urban sites. Fortunately, using the lessons learned from our own dose of reality, we did find an ideal urban school the following year. Yes, it did produce the same possibilities for our preservice teachers we found in the suburban school.

Suburban School's Effects on Preservice Teachers

SUBURBAN SCHOOL'S CONTRIBUTIONS	OUTCOMES FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS
Shared same literacy philosophy as college professor	View teacher as a decision-maker
Same literacy strategies modeled in school as those taught in course	See teachers as colleagues
Willingness to observe and conference with preservice teachers beyond "contract"	Teacher's professional knowledge base needs to be extensive
Involvement in planning course with professor	Teachers use assessment to inform instruction and meet individual needs
Comfort with peer coaching strategies and feedback	Children are active learners who contribute from their background knowledge
Employed readers and writers' workshops in classroom	Teacher's role is to model and facilitate learning
Used authentic assessment practices	Teachers need to self-reflect to improve teaching practices
Viewed children as active learners	

Figure 3

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Teacher Education* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on the preparation of teachers.

Articles may describe best practices for professional education courses, field work, mentoring, action research, school-university partnerships, etc.

Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Teacher Education* Editor:

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